

Puerto Rican Immigrants to the Chicagoland Area After World War II

Rikki Edwards

Brookwood Junior High School, Glenwood

Teacher: Harry Daley

Puerto Ricans have immigrated to the United States of America and the Chicago land area since the early 1940s. Many have succeeded to high political, sports, and social standards. Puerto Rico's history, people, and heritage are as important as many other cultures in Chicagoland for many different reasons. Their culture has been discriminated against despite their contributions to our country's economic and war efforts. Puerto Ricans found Chicago along with many other cities as a place to plant their roots.

Puerto Ricans left their country in search of economic conditions and opportunities that our country offered for immigrants to satisfy wartime production. Many also immigrated because of poverty on their island. When they first arrived many worked in factories, mostly manufacturing companies. Most of the Puerto Rican immigrants settled in northeastern states. The biggest concentration was in New York which was home to 1.1 million Puerto Ricans. In 1917, the Jones Act granted American citizenship to Puerto Ricans. Within the last thirty years vast numbers of Puerto Ricans made home in New Jersey, Florida, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Connecticut, Illinois, California, Ohio, and Texas. In 1910 there were 1,500 Puerto Ricans in the United States; by 1930 there were 53,000 Puerto Ricans. Immigration to the Chicagoland area was primarily based on the steel industry, where many Puerto Ricans found work.

Most of the Puerto Rican immigrants came to Chicago during World War II. By 1980 112,000 Puerto Ricans lived in Chicagoland. The Northwest Side of Chicago received a greater

number of Puerto Ricans than any other part of Illinois. Chicago is the home to the second largest population of Puerto Rican immigrants in the United States behind New York, which is home to fifty percent of the Puerto Rican population in the United States. Many Puerto Ricans in Chicago were part of an organization called Caballeros de San Juan, Knights of St. John. The group's aim was to promote more Puerto Rican leadership in Chicago. In the late 1950s, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico established a second mainland office in Chicago. This office helped protect the rights of contract farm laborers in the midwestern states. West Town and Humboldt Park was the home of 42 percent of the Puerto Rican immigrants by the end of the 1970s.

Employment in Chicago was not hard to find. Many Puerto Ricans in Chicagoland found work in factories, since Chicago is one of the biggest manufacturing cities in the United States. Jobs were relatively unskilled; no education or ability to speak and understand English was necessary. The only thing a worker had to possess was the urge to work. Many of the workers in these factories lived in the suburbs of Chicago. Eight percent of the Puerto Ricans in the Chicagoland area lived in the suburbs.

A famous Puerto Rican group called Menudo brought its musical traditions to Chicagoland. Menudo's audience included twenty million Hispanics. "The sultry Latin dances in *Dirty Dancing* (1987) and *Salsa* (1988) made these films box-office hits," according to one historian. Menudo was the first Latin group to make a mark in Rock 'n' Roll. Menudo made over fifty million dollars annually.

The Puerto Ricans in Chicagoland have been a very influential race not just in the Chicagoland area but the whole United States of America. Puerto Ricans found work in a close-minded society. They provided for their families just like all other immigrants before and after their time. Some Puerto Ricans have been more successful than others. Puerto Ricans have been

able to adjust and survive economic struggles in the course of their life in Puerto Rico and in Chicagoland. Puerto Ricans are one of the many great races in Chicagoland.

[From J. Jerome Aliotta, *The Puerto Ricans*; James Davidson, *The American Nation*; G. Edward Hartmann, *American Immigration*; Joan Moore, *In the Barrios*; W. Martin Sandler, *Immigrants*.]